

## ***La Casa del Padre Román:*** **The Lore of Place**

*Gustavo Ponce*

In Mezcala de Los Romero, a small town in northeastern Jalisco, Mexico, residents refer to one imposing structure as “La Casa del Padre Román.” The colonial-style house, by far the largest in Mezcala, was built approximately four decades ago but now stands abandoned and exposed to the elements of this humid Los Altos region. Walls and colonnades surrounding the central garden have begun to crumble, and giant mildew stains hide portions of the colorful bands and floral motifs painted on the structure’s exterior. The dilapidation is not limited to the garden area; wooden doors leading to the bedchambers, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom have also been marked by termites and the weather. Still, it is easy to imagine how beautiful this house must have been when it was occupied, especially since town residents keep the house alive in narrative. They tell of rare antiques once housed inside; stories of beautiful religious statues, dinnerware pieces, musical instruments, and a grand library with books as old as seven hundred years are all part of the mythos surrounding La Casa.

The style of the structure itself is also intriguing. In *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*, Henry Glassie contemplates whether it is easier to adhere to an old way than it is to conform to the normative standards of popular culture. Also pondering why people continue to create traditional expressive culture, I ask a different question: in an age when technology makes material production fast and inexpensive, why invest resources in older forms? Why, for instance, would a Mercedarian priest—like Padre Román (González López 1998)—go through the trouble of building a house with intricate stained-glass windows and saturate it with stylized decoration, when instead of recreating a “colonial” house he could

have constructed a relatively economical but modern home typical of the dwellings found in the neighborhoods of Mezcala?

In his study of hall furnishings in Victorian America, Kenneth Ames has suggested that material culture can proffer “insights into the past not readily accessible by [means of written records or] verbal approaches” (1978:241). As Glassie’s study demonstrates, the study of things can yield insight into the people and patterns of a region; in addition, it can provide insight into individual motivations and preferences. Ames notes that by investigating the objects that surrounded particular individuals in the past, “we can not only better comprehend their physical environment but come closer to understanding their mentality as well” (1978:241).

Even as residents situate La Casa del Padre Román and its owner within narratives of town and nation, local pride and national injustice, the house tells its own story. The architecture suggests its past as a priest’s home and its intended function as a museum, a place of learning for the people of Mezcala. But the house is also a monument, a physical link to its Mercedarian owner and a suggestion of his cultural values. Its style and ornamentation reflect a concern with the past, perhaps reveal a desire to create new narratives for the priest, his religious order, and the place called Mezcala—stories grounded in the perceived authenticity and grandeur of another time.

### **The Man, His House, and Their Stories**

La Casa del Padre Román was probably built around 1964. One resident whose daughter is now in her late thirties remembered:

*Mi hija Raquel estaba chiquitita cuando entramos ahí . . . un cuarto tenían pero cerrado. Era donde decía \_\_\_\_\_: “Aquí tiene muchas cosas mi tío Román.” Porque el difunto Román era hermano de mi comadre \_\_\_\_\_, y ella decía, “Aquí tiene muchas cosas mi tío Román pero no las ha sacado. No nos las deja ver, y las va a sacar a ver.” (Reynoso 1998)*

My daughter Raquel was just a baby when we used to go inside that house. There was one room in particular that he would keep

shut at all times. This is where \_\_\_\_\_ used to say: “Uncle Román keeps a lot of things in this room.” For you must know that the late Román was brother to my *comadre* \_\_\_\_\_. And she used to say: “Here my uncle keeps a lot of things but he has never taken them outside. He does not allow us to see them for now, but someday he will put them on display.”

In a town where colonial architecture is extremely rare, the physical characteristics of this house point to a concern with antiquity. Pervasive religious iconography also suggests that the house was constructed to convey an air of authenticity and importance. In particular, the house glorifies the Mercedarian brotherhood, a religious order that emphasized freedom, justice, and hope for the imprisoned, the sick, and the impoverished—ideals that led to perpetual political conflict with the colonial authorities of Mexico. Padre Román’s house, so the stories go, was meant to embody these ideals; it was an attempt to create a place of beauty and meditation for those in rural Mezcala.

Such a vision never materialized; before the museum opened its doors to the public, its curator’s life was cut short. Today the house is experiencing the wrath of time and neglect; nevertheless, the legend and memory of “El Padre Román” remain fresh in the minds of Mezcala residents. Some blame Father Román’s death on the Mexican authorities who arrested him. Others believe that the embarrassment caused by the repossession of his belongings<sup>1</sup> created tremendous stress and led to his death. Still others argue that he simply died of a stroke. What *is* known is that the government came down on the priest after someone questioned the way he procured artwork. It was alleged that many of the pieces found in his residence belonged to museums in Mexico, and after the priest’s arrest they were relocated to those institutions. People in the village tell a different story, emphasizing the lawful acquisition of these pieces. It is a story repeated time and again by those in Mezcala, some of whom knew Father Román very well. Whatever the truth may be, the fact is that the house still stands as a physical reminder of the priest’s life and activities on behalf of this small town. It also speaks to a longer history, that of conflict between his Order and Mexican officials.

### *The Mercedarian Order in Mexico*

The Mercedarian Order was established in medieval Europe primarily as a preventive measure against “infidels.” The Order targeted members of the Christian population who came in close contact with Moorish customs or who lived in Moorish-occupied territories; thus, from the beginning, Mercedarians consciously acted as arbiters of culture. The brotherhood’s patron saint is the Virgin of Mercy, whose main duty is to advocate for the well-being of the imprisoned. Today, the Mercedarians largely focus on promoting the Catholic faith among those experiencing a crisis in faith.

Unlike other religious orders that arrived in *Nueva España* during the sixteenth century—the Franciscans (1524), the Dominicans (1526), the Augustinians (1533), the Jesuits (1572), and the Carmelites (1585)—the Mercedarians (1530) experienced a political struggle with the colonial authorities of Mexico long before they even settled in there. This bureaucratic battle for recognition from the viceroy was to last sixty-two years. Partly due to a lack of communication and sometimes in defiance of the king’s orders, local authorities and the viceroy continued to deny the Mercedarians the right to build a monastery in Mexico City. One reason for the denial was that there were too many religious individuals in Mexico. According to friar Pedro Nolasco Pérez, a Mercedarian brother and chronicler of the early twentieth century, by the year 1591 friars were abundant and secular authorities perceived no need to establish new religious orders. He quotes Don Marcos Guerrero, treasurer of the Royal Tribunal:

*Los monasterios están tan poblados, que de ellos se podría sacar mucha cantidad, porque tienen a 200 y a 150 religiosos. . . . Y para esta ciudad, aunque hubiese menos, habría suficiente número. (D. Marcos Guerrero, fiscal de la Audiencia, in Pérez 1924:125)*

The monasteries are so overpopulated, that one could remove a large quantity from them and there would still be too many, because they each have anywhere from 150–200 adherents. . . . And for the needs of this city, even if there were fewer clergymen, there would still be sufficient.

Realizing that the authorities would come up with any pretext to deny them the right to establish a monastery, the Mercedarians proposed the creation of a college. This school would provide education for the common people as well as those planning to join the Order (including students from Guatemala). But like their previous attempts, the idea of a Mercedarian school in Mexico was unacceptable to the authorities. As the royal court in Mexico would later explain, “It does not seem necessary, for now, to create this college, nor for that matter is it necessary to have another Order in this land other than the three that already exist at the moment.”<sup>2</sup>

The Mercedarians, who had arrived in Mexico at roughly the same time as the other religious orders, did not find this argument persuasive. Members of the Order continued performing their acts of charity throughout New Spain, especially in the outskirts of Mexico City, where they built an unofficial dwelling that served as both monastery and church. According to Pérez,

*Los mercedarios poseían, de muchos años atrás, tal vez del tiempo del Virrey Mendoza, un pedazo de terreno, sito [sic] en el barrio de la Trinidad, destinado a la fundación de un convento de su Orden. Una de las primeras providencias del P. García fué cambiar este solar por una casa, que “estaba en el campo, a la salida de México, delante del hospital de los Desamparados.” En ellas vivió con sus compañeros dando buen ejemplos, como si estuviese en convento formado. Se ocupaban de oír confesiones, en predicar en las iglesias y en visitar a los enfermos de los hospitales. Fueron bien recibidos por el pueblo, a quien inspiraba devoción y cariño el hábito de la Merced y el culto de la Santísima Virgen de esta simpática advocación. (Pérez 1924:122)*

The Mercedarians possessed, for a long time, perhaps even from the time of the Viceroy Mendoza, a piece of land located in the neighborhood of the Trinidad [in colonial Mexico City], which was destined to be the founding place for the monastery of their Order. One of the first goals of Father García was to trade this acre of land in exchange for “a country house, located in the outskirts of Mexico City, right across from the hospital for the

homeless." He lived there with his comrades, providing good examples as if the site were indeed an established monastery. They would spend their time listening to confession, preaching in different churches, and visiting the sick at the hospitals. The townspeople loved them; they felt inspired by the monks and their devotion to the Holy Virgin.

By this time, the Mercedarian order was gaining converts. Thus, after many years of frustration and after abandoning their attempts to be recognized officially, a new impetus for acceptance was renewed among members of the brotherhood. Under the leadership of a P. García, the regent of the Mercedarian monastery in Guatemala, a full-scale campaign to gain support was renewed. This time, however, the Order appealed directly to the Supreme Council of the Indies (the royal authorities in Spain) instead of working through local channels. In 1592 the king granted recognition. On 11 January 1592, Father García (the main defender and promoter of the rights previously granted to the Mercedarian order by the king twenty-seven years earlier) was notified by the royal authorities in Madrid that the viceroy and the Audiencia of New Spain must favor the deeds of the Mercedarians. Thus, a struggle that had begun in 1530 was resolved sixty-two years later (Pérez 1924:125).

### *Narratives of Place*

In the mid 1960s, almost four hundred years after the King of Spain recognized the Mercedarians, Father Román built a home that includes not only a shrine to the Virgin of Mercy, but also much symbolism that affirms this religious order. It is as if the priest deliberately planned to establish the authority and legitimacy of his brotherhood by bombarding his visitors with Mercedarian iconography. Today, few residents know much about the history of the Mercedarians; only those who knew Father Román best are aware that his training required him to leave town and enter the *Noviciado de Toluca*, a monastery located in central Mexico. Nevertheless, the recurring motifs of Mercedarian imagery found in the architectural features of this house attempt to convey a sense of the Order's

continuity, in spite of the obscure presence that it has had since colonial times. Simultaneously a monument to those who waged the battle for recognition and a way to proclaim his own identity, this example of vernacular architecture is a means to tell a story missing from the annals of conventional Mexican history.

Padre Román's house is an architectural document that offers an alternative view of history, a history told by people who at one point found themselves oppressed. In an ironic twist of fate, the priest would eventually learn for himself what it was like to be accosted and harassed by the same hegemonic forces that once despised his Mercedarian brothers. But even after the government's successful attempt to soil Padre Román's reputation, this residential monument serves as an impetus for local residents to tell unofficial stories about the priest, his religious order, and the town he left behind.

La Casa del Padre Román presents most of the architectural characteristics that Tim Street-Porter suggests were typical of a colonial Mexican home, including inward-looking rooms assembled around internal courtyards with colonnades, as well as a large portal "with a pair of massive doors sufficiently wide to admit a carriage" (1989:84–85). But the home was built well after the colonial period (1521–1821). Although written records about the house do not exist, logos featured in two stained-glass windows, oral testimonies given by Mezcala residents, and the use of certain construction materials place its construction in the mid 1960s. The pseudo-colonial trappings "traditionalize" the house, claiming antiquity in spite of its relatively recent origin. As Richard Bauman has noted, the act of traditionalization is effected through "a symbolic construction by which people in the present establish connections with a meaningful past and endow particular cultural forms with value and authority" (Bauman 1992:128). Perhaps the priest wanted to "establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:1), one that evoked the idea of the colonial. In Mezcala, the word "colonial" conjures feelings of "elegance, uniqueness, antiquity," something uncommon within the present local architecture but highly imbued with historical value and meaning—"an architectural style that we can learn a lot from" (Saldivar 2002; Ulloa 2002).

## The Colonial Façade

It is the exterior of the house that gives passers-by an initial glimpse into the import of this structure. Sanford suggests that the façade of the colonial home tends to be “plain” (with the exception of the main portal, which some consider the keynote of the house, and the niches containing the statues of saints that are placed directly over the doorway) (1947:164). The façade of Padre Román’s house displays more elaborate ornamentation than usual, including details such as whimsical sun-faced rain gutters, a towering double cross that crowns the niche of the Virgin of Mercy, wrought-iron window grilles that each display a Mercedarian coat of arms, and many other decorative details. Perhaps the numerous decorative elements found on the front of this “colonial” house are part of the priest’s efforts to adorn the dwelling with Mercedarian iconography and thus infuse the site with religious distinction.

Although some consider the courtyard to be the heart and soul of the colonial house in Mexico, I have chosen to begin this discussion with the façade precisely because most Mezcalsenses are familiar with the exterior (fig. 1). Since the doors of this house have remained closed for most of its existence, the rest of the dwelling has remained largely a mystery. This is not to say, however, that only friends and relatives of the priest have been able to set foot inside. On several occasions during the 1980s the house was used as a site for graduation balls; its large courtyard and its wide spaces along the open corridors made it ideal for large gatherings. Throughout that decade and into the 1990s, the house was also inhabited by various renters. Some were members of local families, but often the tenants were “out-of-towners” looking for a place to spend the night. Although Mezcala once had a *mesón* or inn, it is no longer in service, and today Mezcala has no hotel accommodations. Visitors either spend the night with relatives or return home the same day; only adventurous types decide to stay overnight. For example, members of brass bands who come to town to play during the festival of San Bartolo were once regulars at this house. Tenants of this residence also included members of the national guard or the army, who were sometimes sent by the government to establish order

or to perform sting operations. But none of the visitors stayed very long. Perhaps La Casa del Padre Román was just too big, and its sheer size made guests uncomfortable. In any case, no one has inhabited this place for long periods of time.

Some fortunate ones have had the opportunity to spend some time inside—walking in and out of the home’s multiple rooms, strolling through its corridors, or sitting at the foot of the fountain—and have experienced its haunting grandeur. But many people in Mezcala have not viewed this house in its entirety, nor are they aware of the existence of one particular room: Padre Román’s chapel. This room was off-limits to guests of recent public social events, and with good reason. As I discovered during my latest visit to this house, the chapel is one of the most lavishly decorated areas.

Many of the decorative treasures of this house, then, remain hidden behind the massive wall we call a façade. But before attempting to explore the treasures that lie inside, it may be instructive to consider first those that are present on the outside. Only then will we be able to understand the significance of the imagery that is found throughout the house and piece together the message that Padre Román wanted to communicate.

### *The Double Cross and the Saint’s Niche*

A large double cross made of stucco graces the top of Padre Román’s edifice, an iconographic piece surely intended to alert the people of Mezcala to the existence of the Mercedarian Order. The founder of this religious brotherhood, St. Peter Nolasco (fig. 2), is often depicted carrying this cross. Just below the cross, a niche once housed a religious effigy. Today the niche is cluttered with the nests of swallows who have converted this Palladian site into their own home. One resident of Mezcala reports that the Virgin of Mercy inhabited this space before the birds, and indeed I encountered a broken sculpture of a virgin lying on the floor in one of the large main rooms. Perhaps the statue fell from its spot and broke into pieces; however, the remarkable condition of the statue’s base suggests the possibility that someone deliberately removed the image from its pedestal and placed it in a safer place inside the house. Although I looked throughout the room for the virgin’s head, I could not locate it.<sup>3</sup>

Both sides of the niche and the entire roofline of the house are ornamented with juxtaposed semicircles and short columns topped by spheres. This neoclassical motif proliferated during the Porfirian era (Yampolski and Sayer 1993:52). But unlike those ornate spheres, which were often adorned with rococo, baroque, and neoclassical designs, those found at this house in Mezcala are quite plain. Their only decoration is a red pigment that further accentuates their simplicity: the color red evokes clay, terra cotta, everyday use.

### *The Rain Gutters*

The rain gutters just below these decorations are more striking, though not substantially different in style (fig. 3). These lovely sun-faced creatures sport plump mustaches, heavy flame-shaped eyebrows, long noses, and incised eyes. Emitting “rays” of light that form the rain spouts and culminate in a star-shaped burst, their mischievous faces draw ready attention from passers-by. In Mezcala, Padre Román’s rain gutters are an architectural curiosity and a decorative rarity. Although terra cotta flower pots and roof tiles are common in this town, ceramic works like these rain gutters are expected to be found only in Mexico’s colonial towns or in communities with strong ceramic traditions, such as Tonalá, Jalisco. Perhaps the terra cotta ornaments of this house did come from Tonalá, located only a few hours away from Mezcala. The limestone sculptures found throughout the house, on the other hand, could have come from the quarries around Yahualica, another city within driving distance. The importation of both the rain gutters and the limestone work suggest the priest’s deliberate attempt to recreate a sense of colonial antiquity and position his monument within a venerable past.

### *The Wrought-Iron Window Grilles*

The second tier or level of the façade contains five large windows, two on the left side of the main entrance and three on the right. According to Sanford’s description of the typical colonial home, “first-story windows are usually protected by grilles, which maybe found in a variety of designs in wrought iron.” The windows of La Casa del Padre Román match this description. They are fronted with iron grilles,

while “solid wood folding blinds, hinged to swing in,” are located immediately behind the bars (1947:264). Street-Porter argues that the typical colonial house “presented an inscrutable walled façade with windows masked by decorative iron grillwork reflecting the Moorish desire to protect the family from the outside world” (1989:84–85). But the decorative work itself suggests an additional function. The middle of the fourth partition of each grille includes a design of Mercedarian origin: it is the Mercedarian shield or coat of arms, which is worn by all members of this Order, usually on the right breast of the robe. Statues of the Virgin of Mercy depict her wearing the same type of insignia. The shield consists of red and white bands intersected by a cross. Some representations of this shield contain an uneven number of bands (e.g., four red and five white) on the bottom of the piece; the top portion of the shield is usually red, while the rest of the cross is white. Both the cross and the window grilles, then, mark this home as religiously significant.

### *The Wooden Portal*

Another aspect of the house that adheres to the typical architectural characteristics of the colonial home is the main portal. Street-Porter describes “a pair of massive doors sufficiently wide to admit a carriage,” which “provided access to the private world within” (1989:84–85). Despite the fact that Padre Román’s home was constructed long after carriages ceased to be used in this town and almost 150 years after this type of architecture went out of style, today the main entrance boasts this “colonial” entrance.

Sanford remarks, “It is the entrance doorway that is the exterior keynote of the house. . . . Though the rest of the façade may be plain, any stone carving or any heraldry or sculpture employed is concentrated there” (1947:164). Though La Casa del Padre Román does have a saint’s niche at the entrance, the façade does not include the family escutcheon, a common decorative feature of houses in Spain and its colonies during the mid-sixteenth century. In the spot where this heraldic architectural motif would have been placed in colonial times—over the doorway—Father Román’s home instead boasts an oval decoration. The absence of a familial symbol, combined with the presence of the Mercedarian

elements, suggests that the latter was a more prominent aspect of Padre Román's identity, of the story he wanted to tell about himself.

Additionally, Sanford notes that "the outer doorway of the [colonial] house is usually filled with a pair of massive wood doors, often elaborately paneled" (1947:263). This is true in the priest's dwelling: the word *puerta* (door) fails to capture the sheer size and the artistic splendor of the entrance to La Casa. *Puertón*—meaning "massive door or gate"—would be a more fitting term, expressing the weight of the paired doors and the arch that surrounds them. The doors feature the intricate door knockers that distinguish rich colonial houses as well. Here, they include a cast bronze floral design and the top section of a lion's head doorknocker. Art historians such as Yampolski and Sayer argue that "the king of the beasts was symbolically used to guard many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century haciendas, giving owners a feeling of strength and power" (1993:138). Thus, the beautiful bronze knocker adds a flair of antiquity and elegance to the main entrance of this home.

Between the floral adornment and the lion's head lies a hole, probably the spot where the remainder of the knocker once was. Its absence means that the device is no longer functional; however, the opening left behind has a new purpose: it provides access to the home's interior. Because the house has remained closed to the public for a long time, many Mezcalenses (especially children) have peered through this opening to get a glimpse of what lies beyond the guardian beast. From this peephole people can see the magnificent statue of the virgin that adorns the garden and the light that falls upon the middle of the fountain (fig. 4). The view from this portal also reveals that, like most patios of colonial houses, the garden of La Casa del Padre Román has fallen into disrepair. Although the presence of the fountain might suggest an "aura of repose" on any given day or "coolness in hot weather," the play of water is no longer heard (Yampolski and Sayer 1993:140).

The rest of the architectural decoration around the main portal includes a Spanish wrought-iron lamp or *candelero* and a Roman arch supported by two pseudo-Palladian columns. Finally, the bottom tier of the façade is composed of a series of vertical concrete slabs. These rectangular panels do not conform to the colonial design and suggest that this section of the façade was a preventive measure against

humidity. Even though such an anachronistic feature may have been distracting to the critic of “colonial” architecture, the tier was necessary to avoid future structural damage to the house.

### The Chapel Room

Within the home, one finds the chapel room; its most striking features are glorious stained-glass windows and elaborate wall adornments. As noted earlier, the chapel room was the least accessible and the most restricted area of the house. As a result, the room has managed to maintain its beauty and charm despite its abandonment. Perhaps because of the room’s very inaccessibility, this place looms large in the memories of Mezcala residents. According to one individual I interviewed, the chapel contained some of the most expensive and beautiful religious artifacts and sculptures owned by the priest, including a rare crucifix made of *huizache*<sup>4</sup> branches and a custom-made image of the Virgin of Mercy.

*El cristo que tenía en el altar también estaba super-impresionante. A mi no me gustaba nada, estaba muy, muy impresionante, era de huizache. Yo me acuerdo que decían. Yo pienso que ese cristo también se lo robaron [los agentes de gobierno], son de lo que le quitaron; ese cristo y la virgen de la Merced. ¡Ay, es que era tan hermosa! Ese cristo lo tenía en el altar y la virgen la tenía en el coro. En el coro la tenía porque era tan grande y como la hizo más grande porque la hizo en un mundo, es así con muchas nubes y luego un mundo. Y estaba ella sentada. (Barba Peña 1998)*

The crucifix that he had on the altar was amazing. I did not like it a bit; it left a very deep impression on me. It was made of *huizache*, or so they used to say. I think that this crucifix was also stolen [by the government officials]; it is one of those pieces that they confiscated from him, along with the Virgin of Mercy. Oh, it [the statue] was so beautiful! He had the crucifix on the altar and the Virgin was located by the choir pews. He had it in the choir section because it was so huge and he made it even bigger when he added a globe to it. It [the bottom of the statue] had like a lot of clouds and then a world. She was sitting down.

Her memories of the house and its artifacts immediately led her to reflect on its primary occupant as well, and the events that surrounded him:

*Yo digo, ¿no nos la cambiarían?, o sea, que ahora la hicieran otra vez entera, como ella era. Porque ella era La Virgen de la Merced. Y él era mercedario. Entonces puede ser que [los agentes] hayan pensado que se la había robado, pero no se la había robado. (Barba Peña 1998)*

Sometimes, I say to myself, could they [the officials] have changed it, that is, could they have put it back together as it used to be? She was the Virgin of Mercy, and he [the priest] was a Mercedarian. As a result, it's possible that [the officials] could have thought that he had stolen it. But he did not.

This woman concludes her statement by saying that El Padre Román was not a thief. Though he was indeed a Mercedarian who happened to have a great collection of artwork, that did not necessarily make him a criminal.

Further testimonies echo this one. Narratives about the pieces that adorned his house also suggest that the objects were rightfully his and that the authorities had no right to confiscate them:

*Todas las cosas que el tenía, todas las personas se las obsequiaban o él se las compraba. O les cambiaba cosas. Pero nunca se las robaba. Es que él tenía un carácter tan bonito, era tan alegre que donde quiera caía bien. (Barba Peña 1998)*

All the things he had were presented to him by other people or he would buy them. Or he would trade with people. But he would never steal them. He had a great personality, he was so lively that anywhere he went he would make a good impression.

One man told of a special occasion when the priest was given a statue of the virgin by a family who was sponsoring a party:

*Una vez nos dieron una comida en una casa, entonces [al padre Román] se le antojó una imagen de una virgen. Entonces [el*

*padre] dijo: "Véndame esa imagen." . . . Y ya para irnos le dijeron: "Padre, llévase la imagen." Y ya se la regaló y ya [el padre] se la llevó. Y así tenía muchas cosas que le regalaban. "* (Barba Ibarra 1998)

On one occasion we were given a luncheon at a certain house. It was then that the priest became enamored with an image of the virgin [that he saw in this house]. Then the priest said: "Sell me that image." . . . And when we were about to leave [the party] they told him: "Father, take the image with you." They gave it to him and he took it home. And that is how he had so many things: they were mostly gifts from people.

He continues by describing how other objects in this house originated from familiar places, if not from familiar people:

*Otras cosas las compraba en Tepito. En aquellos años compraba muchas cosas en Tepito. Ahí tenía un cristo que yo a mi no me gustaba dormir en esa pieza porque tenía un cristo muy feo. "No," ya dijo [el padre], "Ese lo compré en Tepito." (Barba Ibarra 1998)*

He would buy other things from Tepito. During those years, he would buy a lot of things from Tepito. There [in his house] he had a crucifix. I never liked sleeping in that room because he had a Christ figure that was frightening. The priest would then tell me: "Don't be afraid; I bought that crucifix in Tepito."

Tepito, a neighborhood in Mexico City notorious for its black market, is a place where people can buy merchandise from all over the world. By mentioning that the crucifix had been procured in a popular market rather than some alien place, Father Román hoped to assuage this individual's fears.

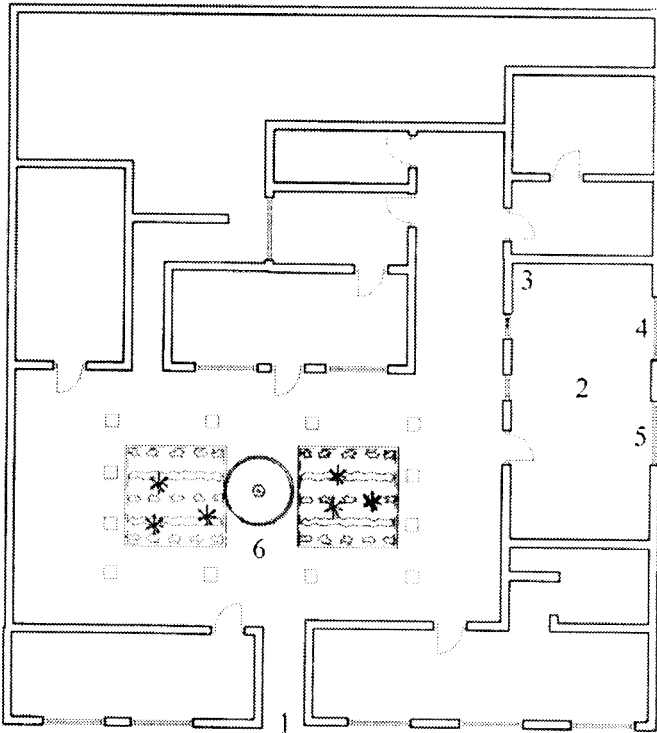
Thus, the stories that people tell about Padre Román, his home, and the objects housed therein serve to embed the man and the structure within matrices of personal relationships and familiar locales. Once again, however, the house tells its own story as well. The crucifixes and statues of the Virgin described by contemporary Mezcalenses comprised only a part of the beautiful decorations of the chapel. The

room was also adorned with patterned floor tiles, stylized flower motifs, marble columns, and superb stained-glass windows. Each marked the space as separate and sacred.

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### Floor plan, La Casa del Padre Román

- 1 = Entrance
- 2 = Chapel room
- 3 = "Marble" column
- 4 = Window portraying angels and Mercedarian shield
- 5 = Papal window
- 6 = Garden with fountain



### *The Tile Floors*

Sweeping aside the dust that has permeated every corner of the chapel, a glimpse of the floor tiles emerges. The tiles alternate plain red and multi-color designs. Those with intricate floral designs are smaller in size and placed on the corners of the bigger tiles. This arrangement creates an unusual and anachronistic juxtaposition of cheaply produced *mosaico* tiles (employed as a construction material in Mexico only since the beginning of the twentieth century) and sumptuous *azulejo* (used in construction since the sixteenth century). This type of *azulejo* is strikingly similar to the Talavera tiles one finds in the state of Puebla, perhaps indicating that these pieces originated in the famous ceramic warehouses of that central Mexican city. Talavera tiles enjoy a reputation for fine craftsmanship and a long tradition of beauty. In any event, the priest's selection of such handmade and hand-painted pieces indicates careful choices made, perhaps, to bolster a project of traditionalization.

### *The Walls*

"In addition to effects gained by the use of colored tiles," says Sanford, "painted plaster surfaces lend added color to the decorative scheme of the Mexican house, very simply achieved by the use of water paint in soft tones." "Sometimes," he adds, "a whole surface of a house is painted in delicate hues of blue or yellow or pink; but, more commonly, color effects are gained by the use of broad painted bands" (1947:266). Not surprisingly, the walls of Padre Román's home fit this description.

These painted features are most prevalent along the open corridors and in the chapel room. Decorations on the walls surrounding the open courtyard consist mainly of giant green leaves and gray stylized flower motifs. Both of these designs overlay a brown colored band, itself divided into two parts (one much thicker than the other) by a white stripe. This creates the illusion of three bands, when in reality the white band is the natural color of the wall. The bands traverse the walls facing the patio, interrupted only by entryways, window frames, and the occasional pedestal or niche.

In the chapel room the painted designs are more elaborate and the colors are much brighter. The stripe patterns found on the walls of the

patio are repeated, although here the walls are soft pink instead of white and the other bands are green. A fourth band of bright pink runs along the bottom of the wall. Furthermore, the wider of the two green bands is disrupted by the addition of several Palladian motifs painted to resemble the color and patterning of marble. Although this faux marble appears sloppily executed—some of the color combinations, for instance, extend beyond the oval figures and onto the green portions of the wall—the elaborate drawings surrounding the room’s Neo-Gothic window openings more than compensate.

### *The Stylized Flower Motifs*

These design motifs serve a function similar to that of the broad painted bands: “These are used as dados, as trim around doors and windows, or as a cornice at the top of a wall” (Sanford 1947:266). When designing this window trim, the artist(s) added yet another color to the already brightly painted room. In addition to the soft pink, bright “Mexican” pink, dark green, and black hues, soft yellow is used as a mixture in the flower arrangements that are present on both right and left sides of the windows. The color intensifies as the vines climb to the peak of the windows, where they meet in a bright yellow element that resembles a spear. These color patterns are rarely used in today’s modern homes. Plain color tiles, oil-based paints, and even wallpaper have replaced the elaborate freehand motifs of colonial times.

### *The “Marble” Columns*

The chapel also features two Ionic columns, which signal the beginning of the chancel. In spite of their realistic marble appearance, these columns are made of wood. And unlike the Palladian designs described earlier, someone did a fine job with these two architectural components (especially with the portion of the column known as the “shaft”). One striking element of the “capital” or top portion of the column is its gold leaf finish. Without doubt the best preserved part of the column and perhaps the chapel in general, these capitals suggest how beautiful this room must have been when fully furnished with statues of the saints and other accouterments. It is not hard to understand why residents who once visited here remain mesmerized by their memory of it. No other house in Mezcala combines so much

embellishment in a single structure. Even the town's church, with its elaborate chandeliers and dome ceilings, seems simple in comparison to the home of Padre Román. Though art historians might regard the structure as rustic, people from Mezcala find its architectural contents (and the stories attached to them) exhilarating.

### *The Windows*

Perhaps the chapel's stained-glass windows provide the best clues to Father Román's intents and purposes. Of the four colored windows in the chapel, three of them depict religious entities: the Pope and the Vatican, the Archbishop of Jalisco, and the Mercedarian Order. Each is represented by a coat of arms; thus, in the chapel more explicitly than above the entrance portal, the priest has reinterpreted colonial (familial) heraldic motifs as religious ones. The papal window, for example, depicts the coat of arms of Pope Giovanni XXIII (pontiff from 1958–1963), as well as other symbols associated with the papacy. Among these are the tiara crown and Saint Peter's keys.<sup>5</sup> Chairs that were once part of the home's furnishings also portray two elements from this pope's coat of arms. Photographs show a castle tower and a double fleur-de-lis carved on the reclining portion of one chair (claimed by some Mezcala residents to be a relic from far earlier times). Both window and chair suggest that the priest meant to pay homage to the recent pontiff and his authority over the modern Roman Catholic realm.

To the left of the papal window, and within the confines of the altar, is the Mercedarian window. The bottom portion of this window is missing, but the image in the center is still visible. Two angelic figures carry the Mercedarian coat of arms (fig. 5). The two angels holding this magnificently colored design are probably associated with a religious legend dating back to the thirteenth century. The story tells of a priest who was captured by the Moors in the medieval city of Cava Vaca, Spain, and forced to hold a mass to satiate their curiosity. As the priest began the mass, he realized that there was no cross in the room; thus, he could not continue with the service. Suddenly, two angels appeared, carrying a double cross.

Padre Román's window replaces the double cross with the Mercedarian symbol. The posture of the angels (descending from heaven) indicates that they are holding something important, an image

to be adored, something so delicate that only superior beings (and those who wish to follow the teachings of the Virgin of Mercy) can approach. The crown on the top of the shield also reinforces the idea that this symbol belongs to the Mother of God Herself and therefore deserves respect. The cross in the middle of the shield, on the other hand, is most likely a reference to the Crusades and the role that the Mercedarian Order played in it. It is a reminder of the many souls that were “saved” from captivity and the threat of Moorish beliefs. The symbolic and historical resonances of the images in this window combine to create a powerful statement about the Mercedarian Order.

### **La Casa del Padre Román as Local History**

What do Mezcalenses make of the house? Many consider it a symbol of faith, part of their local history and Roman Catholic heritage. In the eyes of townspeople the house commands respect regardless of the negative associations it might have accrued after the priest’s arrest. As one individual related, it is the house’s meaning, and the stories that created that meaning, which are responsible for the structure’s continued existence:

*La razón por la cual la Casa del Padre Román no está completamente destruida—como algunas otras casas abandonadas del pueblo—es porque desde muy pequeños se nos ha dicho que las cosas que tienen que ver con la religión se respetan. Si no ya estuviera, no sólo más arrumbada la casa, sino también más destruida de lo que está. (Ortíz 2001)*

The reason people have not destroyed this house—as they often do with other abandoned dwellings in town—has to do with the fact that from a very early age, we have been instructed by our elders that religious things ought to be treated with respect. If this were not the case, *La Casa del Padre Román* would be in worse shape than it already is.

For some, *La Casa del Padre Román* also has claim on personal memories. It is often associated, for example, with social practices that included the entire community. Rites of passage such as the annual

elementary school graduation ball were often celebrated here, as were wedding receptions and other major events. In a town with limited educational opportunities, primary school graduation is particularly significant; having an elementary school education is seen as one of the most important steps to a brighter future. Since few people can afford to send their children to school, the education of children in Mezcala usually comes to a screeching halt after the child graduates from junior high. For many students, the graduation ceremony was the only chance they had to visit the house, an opportunity to explore its nooks and crannies while the rest of the guests danced through the night. The experience of being able to visit this structure in its prime seems to have been permanently etched in collective memory. For people in Mezcala, the significance of the house lies not in its monetary value, but rather in its capacity to serve as a space for social and communal interaction:

*Con sólo tener la fiesta del sexto en ese lugar ya se nos hacía que la ocasión era muy especial. Al mismo tiempo, el hecho de entrar a un lugar tan espacioso, tan bonito, y hasta cierto punto “prohibido” y sin explorar, lo hacía aún más divertido. Sin embargo, nosotros no fuimos los únicos en pasar por esa experiencia tan agradable, cientos de niños “desfilaron,” también, por los rincones de esa casa, ya que su fiesta de graduación también tuvo lugar ahí. Es por eso que ese lugar tiene importancia para nosotros y para la historia local. (López, Ortíz, et al. 2001)*

Part of the fun of having the graduation ball at that house was being able to enter a “forbidden place” that few people had ever seen or explored. Just the thought of having the graduation ball at that particular house made it all the more special. But we were not the only ones to experience the house; generations of children that came before us also celebrated their graduation party there too. This is why the house is important to us and to our local history.

None of those with whom I spoke perceived this house as a liminal space or as a locus for the macabre (as one might expect to hear

regarding abandoned houses). Several stories dealing with the presence of ghosts haunting the premises did surface during our conversations. But these, my interlocutors claimed, were unsubstantiated stories they had heard as children, tales told to them by their peers. Far from being associated with houses situated on the fringe of reality, this house is regarded as a site of admiration, as a potential house of prayer, and as a monument worthy of being preserved for posterity. Most important of all, La Casa del Padre Román is seen by Mezcalenses as an architectural and communal space capable of inspiring reflection and meditation on the life and fate of their beloved local priest.

### **Conclusion**

In selecting the architectural design of this house, Father Román settled on a style exemplified by the vernacular architecture of colonial Mexico—a style rooted in tradition, an architectural form that could be partially replicated to suggest authenticity and authority, a style not of his time but rather of his brothers who came before him. The priest must have known of their struggle and their unexpected delay in establishing a monastery. In building his house, perhaps he saw the perfect opportunity to design a place that would resemble a monastery: a place for living, a place for meditating, and a locus for honoring those figures that fought to keep the Order viable. This museum of religious iconography would be a place of worship as well, a building that would tell its visitors about the hierarchy of the papacy and the legends of saints and angels. Perhaps El Padre Román wanted to tell a little of his own story as well, using architecture as a vehicle to link himself to a venerable past (Bauman 1992:136). Despite his arrest and humiliation, he seems to have achieved this goal. To the residents of Mezcala de Los Romero, La Casa del Padre Román is more than a simple colonial-style house. The house calls up memories of community practices and government intrusion; it is a placed symbol of a man and his ideals, as well as a reminder of his tragic end.

## Notes

1. Not everything in the house was confiscated by the police. Several religious statues can still be found in the cloister and throughout the garden, including an eighteenth-century granite atrial cross that the government apparently did not recognize as valuable. The fact that only certain pieces were taken by the Mexican authorities seems to confirm residents' beliefs that the objects were rightfully owned by the priest and that the police raid was nothing more than an attempt to forcefully grab a piece of the priest's impressive collection. Some residents also doubt whether these repossessed pieces were in fact returned to museums as authorities claimed.

2. "*A esta Real Audiencia parece que, por ahora, no es necesario este colegio, ni que haya en esta tierra otra Orden más de las tres que al presente hay*" (in Pérez 1924:121).

3. The few broken pieces I did recover, however, suggest that the sculpture did not portray La Virgen de la Merced. The moon motif carved at the foot of the statue, as well as its triangular shape, suggest that it may be a representation of other Mexican virgins such as the Virgin of San Juan or the Virgin of Zapopan.

4. *Huizaches* are spiny bushes native to this region of Jalisco; they produce thorns that call to mind the crown worn by Jesus Christ during his crucifixion.

5. The tiara is associated with the three most important figures in the history of Roman Catholicism: Jesus, the apostle St. Peter, and the Pope. It exemplifies the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The tiara crown is also a symbol used by church leaders to remind followers that at the top of the pyramidal structure is God.

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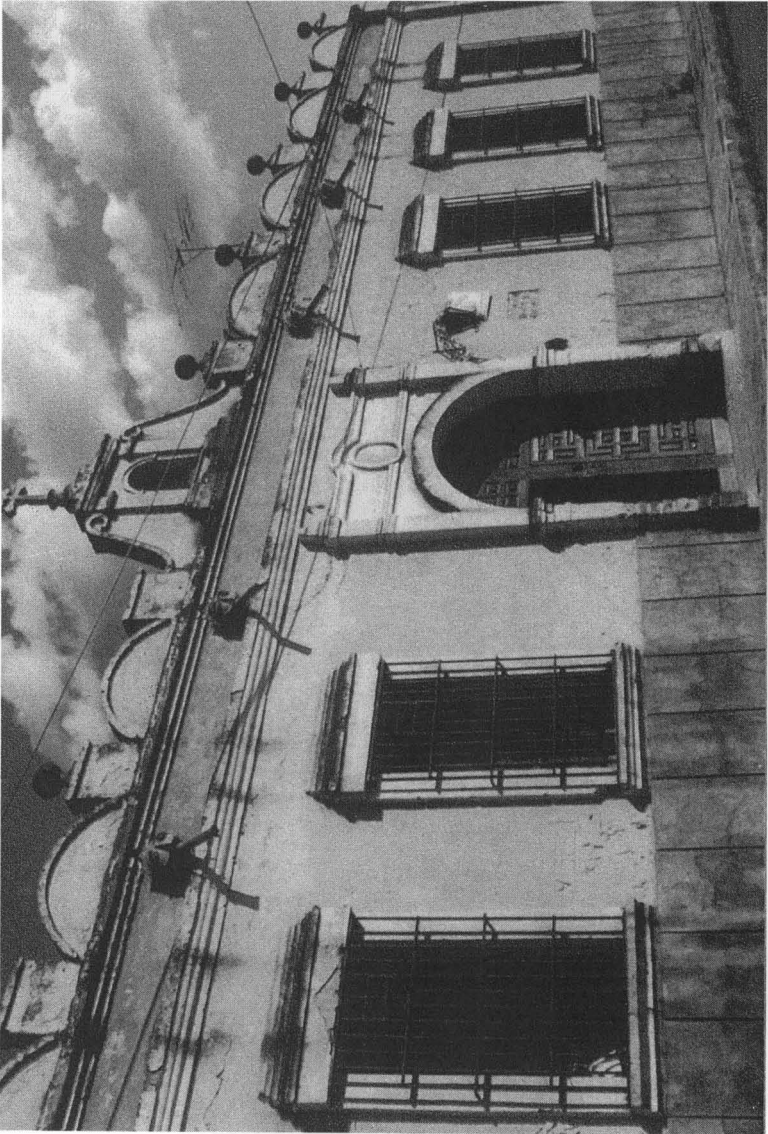


Figure 1. The façade showing wrought-iron window grilles with Mercedarian insignia.

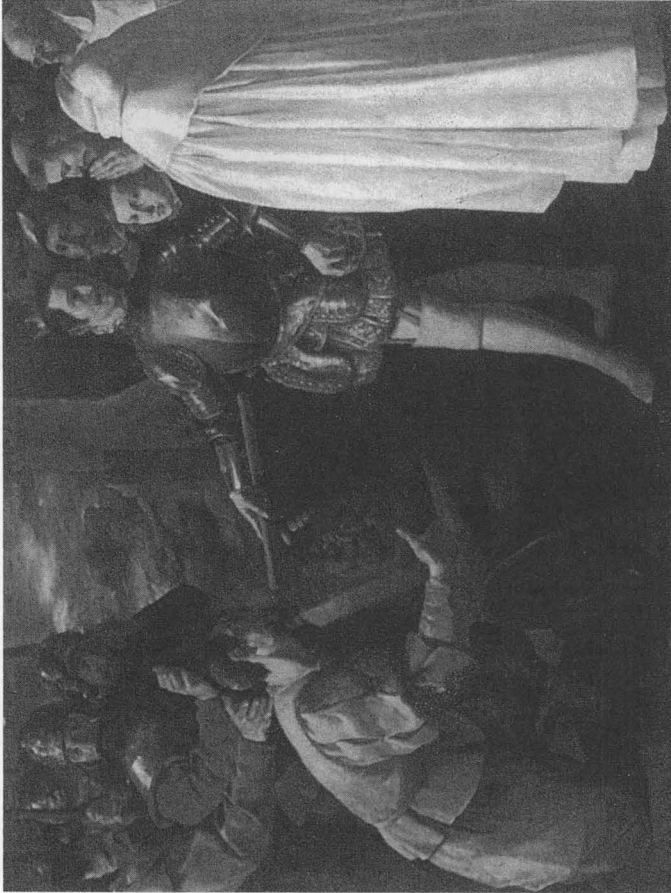


Figure 2. St. Peter Nolasco Recovering the Image of the Virgin, by Francisco de Zurbarán (gift of Miss Mary Hanna, Mr. and Mrs. Charles P. Taft, and Mr. Stevenson Scott in memory of Charles Frederick Fowles). Courtesy Cincinnati Art Museum.

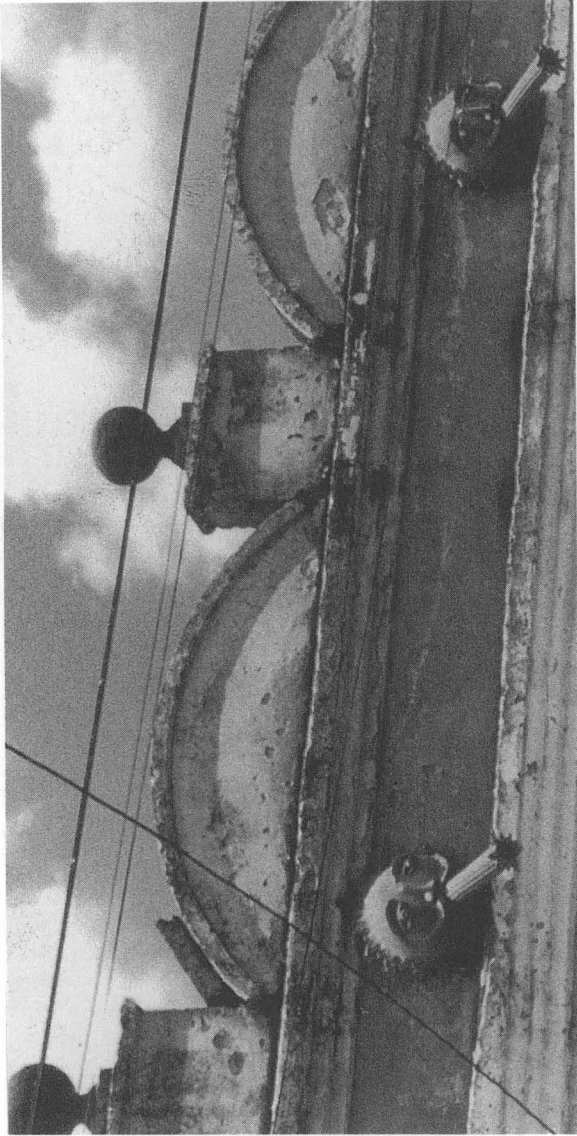


Figure 3. Sun-facing rain gutters.



Figure 4. *Overgrown colonial garden with fountain. Notice broken hands on statue.*



*Figure 5. Angelic figures carrying the Mercedarian shield; one of four stained-glass windows in the chapel room.*